

## Afterwords

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Summary: A continuation of Remembrances of Things Future. Chell, near death from cancer, bids farewell to Alyx, Gordon, and GLaDOS to end her own life as a decoy in the Combine attack on Aperture Science. But GLaDOS has one last surprise in store for her...

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**\*\*Day One: Goodbye to All That\*\***

I think Alyx expected me to give Gordon a kiss when the two of them finally left. For old times' sake, if nothing else. Her reaction was characteristic. She was constantly changing position during our last meeting, while we three were standing by the side of the helicopter that would take them away. She wasn't trying to block me as another and more jealous woman might have, but doing her best to stay clear. She's a lovely person, body and soul. Gordon's lucky to have her.

He's not the man I remember. I understand, but it's still sad. All that he's been through has driven him deep inside himself. The HEV suit is his personal, portable bunker, and he peers out of it as if the whole world were hunting him. Maybe it is. And maybe Alyx can lead him back home again after all this is over. I hope so, anyway.

We shook hands instead, and I saved the hug for Alyx. I held onto her for longer than perhaps I should have, with the morbid thought that this was probably the last human touch I would ever experience. She's so alive, and she makes me feel more alive knowing that she's with Gordon. The best medicine I could have €" the only medicine that can do me any good, now.

Gordon is such a monster of self-control that I was probably being absurdly paranoid, but just to be sure, I decoyed Alyx aside during our preparations late that last evening to slip her some contraceptives and give her a little lecture on the finer points of the birds and the bees. Growing up under the influence of the Combine's reproductive suppression field " which put a damper on desire as well as ability " she hadn't had to deal with possibilities like pregnancy before, even in thought. "I suppose you won't need any of this until after peace comes," I concluded. "But \_better safes than sorry\_, as my mother always said." Alyx laughed, and then looked down, away from my gaze. "I'm sorry about your mother," she said in a quiet voice, and I understood it as meaning "I'm sorry about you" as well. But we'd been through that. The G-man's adjustments to Gordon's timeline had not made it impossible for Gordon and I to be together again, if there had been no Alyx, but my health would have put a swift end to any happiness we might have found. It's best this way.

GLaDOS had never even hinted to me that she had been tracking Gordon all these years. I was furious when I found out, though I tried my best to conceal it from her. \_Selfish bitch\_, I thought momentarily, as we loaded her backup cores into the helicopter. But she did apologize before we took her main AI off line. Some pseudo-sentient subsystems are still running locally, to operate the defense grid and keep the lights on until the end, but nothing of her real personality remains here. She's asleep now for the first time in her life, encrypted and compressed, ready to be brought back to consciousness when the journey is over. All that's awake is a part of her signals subsystem, to receive data. We'll be transmitting from here until the end. Alyx and Gordon don't know about that, and I've instructed GLaDOS to keep her silence and wipe the files if anything nasty happens. But I can't resist that one last chance to say farewell.

I watched them take off into the early afternoon sun with more relief than anything else. \_Goodbye to all that\_ was all that I was thinking, reviewing contingencies, a bit numb. GLaDOS had set up an elaborate decoy system to spoof any radar or infrared detectors the Combine might have trained on this area " even though they can't leave Earth any more, they still have some of their surveillance satellites up and can probably receive data from them. The helicopter has enough range to make it about half-way to the coast, and there is a Resistance forward base where they can refuel. I suppose they will transfer to a fixed-wing plane when they get to the Atlantic, but all that will be decided later. Better not to tell me anyway. I might, if worst comes to worst, fall into Combine hands alive.

After the helicopter disappeared into the distance, I went back into the facility to put the final touches on another spoof, a grimmer one. We had selected one of the many control points as "THE control room" for the purpose of misleading the Combine, and had slapped together a stage set of a command center there, all of it rather more flammable than would have been prudent had it been real. My faux-Gordon, the corpse that GLaDOS had pulled out of her freezer and dressed in an old HEV suit, is already sitting there with his own little refrigeration unit to keep him fresh and neat until the attack begins. If all goes well, the Combine will find little more than a charred body in the heavily damaged remains of an HEV suit, and it will take them quite a bit of work to find out that neither the body nor the suit is authentic. If we are really lucky, they'll jump to conclusions and not bother to test the remains carefully. At the

other side of the control room, they'll find the corpse of a woman, burned beyond recognition, with the remains of a distinctive weapon by its side. That will be me, of course, standing in for Alyx, who lent me her signature firearm. And again, if they are careless, they may never find out who I really am, or that I am not the person they assume me to be.

It's a funny feeling, knowing in advance exactly where you are going to die. \_Here it all ends\_, I thought. \_Your last performance. Better make it good.\_ I have planted some small charges in the surrounding corridors, to blow their walls and ceilings in and provide a credible reason why "Gordon" and "Alyx" don't simply escape when things become critical. After these charges go off, I will be trapped. At that point, the only thing left to do is to set the timer on the explosives inside the room and... exit stage left. I didn't tell Gordon or Alyx, but I plan to shoot myself with Alyx's gun just before the timer reaches zero. I don't want to be knocked unconscious and taken prisoner if by some fluke the place isn't destroyed. I'd rather not burn alive either, if the charges don't kill me. They have to be small, or our whole set-piece here will be a scrambled, unreadable mess, and thus useless. So... bang. I'll make my exit a bit ahead of schedule. Not that it matters.

Mother would have been proud of me. She had told me over and over during her dying to take things into my own hands if Cancer the crab got its claws into me, not be trapped in a hospital bed and kept alive to the last breath to satisfy someone else's code of professional ethics. I'll do all that and more, die for myself and for Gordon and Alyx, the people I love. I wish I could be here, somehow, when those fools get all hot and bothered over finally bagging their Most Wanted duo. And even more, I wish I could see their faces when Alyx and Gordon both show up again, alive as ever, and kick their sorry butts. But imagination will have to do.

I'll die with a smile on my face. Hard to think of a better way.

**\*\*Day Two: The Mountain and the Mouse\*\***

When I was a child, I hated suspense, because it would make my imagination run wild, and whatever happened, good or bad, would always fall short of the pictures in my mind. The safe and the dull drew me, not because I was a coward or a dullard myself, but because I knew my mind, given the slightest opportunity, would supply all the thrills and chills I could ever want or need. Even when I learned rock-climbing and parachute jumping, I was known as the careful one, calm, impassive, unflappable. I kept everything else under the surface.

So, you can imagine how I felt as the Combine attack began. Excitement? I thought this was going to be the climatic event of my life — the last event of my life, as a matter of fact. A tense, gripping struggle between good and evil, with a decisive climax. Boy, did they ever let me down.

GLaDOS had been busy before she left, and for quite a while before that, I expect. Peeking through her spy camera on Gordon's suit, she had shared his combat experience in real time, making notes all the way along. Nothing the Combine could or would try was a surprise to her. Most important, she had seen Gordon take the Advisers out by

disorienting them with flashbangs, imitated it, and improved on it with wicked ingenuity.

I frankly didn't expect Aperture Science to last long when the Combine threw its full weight into an attack. On paper, it was impressive: literally thousands of troops, more than a hundred Hunters, two dozen or so Striders, and every aircraft and helicopter they could scrape up â€" at least fifty. The computer screen in front of me, fed by GLaDOS's recon bots, tallied up these totals in neat columns, but as soon as battle was joined, the columns seemed to spring a leak and deflate, dwindling rapidly away to nothing. It was short and brutal. The area around Aperture Science had been seeded with booby traps and mines â€" GLaDOS must have been working on this for years, as usual without telling me â€" and her idea of a "flashbang" had developed from Gordon's egg-sized black bombs to things the size of an oil drum that went off like small nuclear explosions, with a flash that set trees on fire two hundred meters away. She must have had the time of her life putting all this together, I thought with grim amusement.

The Combine forces never got anywhere near where I was sitting. When what was left of them panicked and tried to retreat, they found that there was a line of traps, bombs, and hidden turrets behind them, a line that had remained dormant when they attacked over and through it, only to activate when they had passed and make retreat impossible. I don't think one in twenty of them made it out of here in one piece. Certainly none of the heavier units â€" Striders, crabsynths, gunships, and the Advisers themselves â€" lived to fight another day. In a matter of a few hours, they were converted from an army to smorgasbord for the salvage bots.

I stared at the screen as the battle progressed. A martial triumph was the one outcome I hadn't prepared myself for. An old saying came into my head as I watched: The mountain hath labored, and brought forth a mouse. They're finished. They'll never be back.

Which leaves me exactly where?

GLaDOS, in her bubbly enthusiasm, had simply forgotten that I'm supposed to die here. It's part of the plan, dammit! With my cancer rapidly advancing, living on will soon become no more than a pointless exercise in enduring pain. But she'd let herself go, and gleefully trashed every Combine unit within five thousand meters, like a kid smashing insects. What am I supposed to do with myself now?

Somehow, suicide doesn't seem an appropriate way to celebrate victory. But I remember how my mother died. In her last few weeks, she was begging us, someone, anyone, just to kill her and stop the pain. I have about three months before I get to that stage, and there's no one here to put a bullet in me at the end.

I'll sleep on it tonight. Tomorrow I'll decide.

**\*\*Day Three: All Roads Lead To Rome\*\***

Another day. I did all my little routine things that I'd thought I'd never do again, killing time in the morning, puttering around cleaning up a few last things I'd left behind, missing the nagging voice of GLaDOS reminding me how inadequate I was, how slow. She's

right. I am slow, sometimes. I need to decide what to do with the life that's she's inadvertently returned to me.

I found my stock of poison, cyanide capsules, and slipped the small plastic bottle into my pocket. That way, if I am suddenly taken ill, I'll have a chance to end things relatively neatly. If anything happens that makes it impossible for me to do something as simple as take a pill... I probably won't need to worry anyway. The decision will be out of my hands. I found myself wishing that that would happen.

In the early afternoon, I drifted back to the "control room" that was supposed to have been yesterday's grave. I sat down, my mind empty, and picked up Alyx's gun. I wondered idly who had built it for her â€" someone had put a great deal of love and care into it. Her father? Or had she made it herself? She hadn't told me.

If I was going to poison myself, I thought, I would be able to wrap the gun up in something and have it returned to her. But who would carry it for me? Maybe just leave it here. I had decided not to blow the facilities up when I ended my life. There was no point in that now. It was secure enough. If by any chance the Combine fought their way inside at a later date, it was set to self-destruct.

Or should I just shoot myself with the gun as I'd planned to do, but somewhere out in the woods, where neither the gun nor I would ever be found? It might be unpleasant for Alyx to get it back. She knows why she left it here. It would puzzle and upset her to hear that I didn't die in the way that I had wished. She'd imagine things. Only I and GLaDOS know that the facilities weren't damaged in the Combine attack. If GLaDOS keeps mum, no one will bother to check this place out for a long time.

I went to the communications room and keyed up GLaDOS's receiver. It came in faint, but clear, which meant that Gordon and Alyx were still safe as well. I tapped in the codes to erase all recordings made after the beginning of the Combine attack. That will make it look as if Aperture Science was destroyed. Then I left a brief encrypted note for GLaDOS that I'd taken matters into my own hands but that the Aperture Science complex was intact.

I'd even had the maintenance bots put our faux-Gordon back into cold storage, dressed in his HEV suit. Maybe, after all this is over, he'll end up in a museum, though they'll have to be very vague in their explanation of how he came to be dead in the first place. It probably won't do to mention that GLaDOS had had his balls cut off, no matter how badly he had been behaving.

I thanked GLaDOS for all she'd done for me, diplomatically resisting the impulse to add and all you've done \*\*to\*\* me too. I asked her to watch over Gordon and Alyx, and take care of them all their lives. I told her that I love them, and that I love her too. That I hoped she would remember me, and that she should always keep herself safe. And then I said good-bye and broke the link, permanently.

One of the small and largely unremarked upsides of imminent death is that you can behave irresponsibly without being overcome by guilt. Over the years, GLaDOS had arranged quite a variety of food for me, even things that would never have grown outside in this climate, greenhouse specials like the tropical fruits that reminded me of my

mother's homeland and visits many years ago to my grandparents. So, with no more need to keep to a balanced diet, I had a dinner of strawberries dipped in chocolate served with full-cream mango ice cream, and the sweet soda that my mother had disapprovingly called "diabetes in a bottle," perversely cheerful that I wouldn't have to suffer the consequences of all those calories.

After dinner, floating on the cloud of an unfamiliar sugar high, I wandered through the complex again. I noticed with amusement that a medbot was discreetly trailing me, and assumed that this was a precaution GLaDOS had taken, in case I "fall down the stairs like the thoughtless idiot you are." I smiled. It was true: we had loved each other, cared for each other, though GLaDOS would die rather than admit it and kill me rather than hear me say it. I made a long orbit through darkened corridors and quiet chambers, until once again I ended up in the control room, sitting at the table, with Alyx's gun the center of a pool of light in front of me.

I do science. I should be able to think this out. There aren't that many variables.

I was supposed to make a decision today. I've been putting it off with sentimentalism and strawberries. It's eleven p.m. now. Decision time.

What would mother have said? That if something was inevitable, it was best to get it over with as quickly as possible. She was a great fan of yanking off band-aids with one tug, that sort of thing. Get it over with. That was what had so horrified her about her own death, even more than the pain. The endless waiting. The helplessness.

I thought about my life as a series of decisions and processes. In period A, one does activity B, which has effect C. That was what you lived for, at least one of the main reasons you went on living. But now there was only a period A for me. I had done everything I could do for those I cared for, and to be honest, everything I could do for myself as well. There was no activity B any more, except for suicide. There was no effect C, except for death. And effect C was coming anyway, soon, inevitable. The only choice was whether it would be under my control or not. All roads lead to Rome, they used to say, I mused. And now, all my roads lead to the graveyard. Putting it off meant that I might lose control, and end up like my mother, only worse, with bots to talk to instead of nurses and my family.

I picked up Alyx's gun and examined it again. It was loaded, and the safety catch was off. It was powerful enough to shoot through a steel door. My references assure me that blowing one's brains out is painless, since the bullet travels faster than impulses move along the pathways of the nervous system. By the time the pain gets from the wound to the brain, you've already left the building, so to speak. This, of course, is predicated on putting the bullet into a vital spot, preferably the lower brainstem.

The traditional way to support the gun so that you are assured of not missing is to put the barrel into your mouth. Ugh. All sorts of unfortunate resonances there. Maybe I'll just point it at my forehead. That way, I might end up with nothing more than a little round red hole between my eyebrows, like a Hindu lady's caste mark. But what do aesthetics matter? When I'm well and truly dead, the cleanup bots will dispose of me, and they don't care one way or the

other. Though I'm sure, if given a choice, they'd rather not have the work of scrubbing my brains off the ceiling.

11:45 PM. The idea that I should do something at midnight to keep yesterday's promise to myself possessed me, but for a few moments, I couldn't focus on what that something was. It danced around the edges of my consciousness like a ghost.

Oh, yes. Blow my brains out.

Might as well do it right here. I'd thought of wandering out into the forest, but why bother? The bots will have months, years, to clean up. All that will be left of me will be entries in their daily reports, archived somewhere, never to be read by anyone. How they cleaned me up. What pieces they divided my corpse into for convenience, and which incinerator was fed which piece. The exact temperature of the fire. How long I took to burn, and where they dumped my ashes. With any luck, I'll end up in the greenhouses. Ashes to ashes, mangoes to mangoes, strawberries to strawberries.

Maybe Alyx and Gordon will come back here, after the peace, years and years after, a tour for old times' sake. Maybe bring their children. Show them where they first met Auntie GLaDOS. And unless something unexpected happens, they will find the greenhouses still operating, and GLaDOS will connect with the system once again and serve them strawberries and mangoes. She'll do that. She has an odd sense of humor, and she knows I wouldn't mind. The family Freeman will sit down, and eat of me, and be happy.

It's good enough. It has to be. I picked up the gun. Suddenly, it seemed very heavy.

And raised it to point directly toward my forehead. It was a bit difficult to pull the trigger that way, so I experimented a bit, changing my grip. It would be embarrassing if the gun slipped at the last minute and I shot my nose off or something.

The second hand on the wall clock swept up toward midnight.

\_Time, gentlemen! \_

Memories of MIT, of a night on the town in Cambridge, a traditional English pub at closing time. I'd been there with Gordon, thousands of years ago now. It had been the night we first made love.

The clock continued to tick. As the second hand reached the top, I pulled the trigger.

There was no sound and no feeling, no blow to the head, no slumping of my body against the table, no clatter of the gun falling.

Just an abrupt darkness and silence. \_See, it didn't hurt at all\_, my mind said to itself. But where am I? and why am I still here?

And then everything faded. I just had time to think \_So this is death. What was all the fuss about?\_, and I was gone.

\* \* \*

><p>Words in darkness. A faint memory of them came back to me much

later, but at the time I did not consciously register them. I was far away, too far to wake, though not too far to hear, to sense, somehow.<p>

\_She is a friend of Dr. Freeman and Miss Vance, and a valuable asset in her own right. Irreplaceable. I hardly think I am imposing on you too much.\_ A dry male voice, ironic in tone, a bit dismissive. Close by. Perhaps right at my side.

\_The task is not easy. The damage is far more widespread and subtle than it was with the Alyx Vance. Do you dread the realm of death so much that you would pull her from it at any cost?\_ The other voice was strange, archaic, in vocabulary and modulation, and it came from my other side, but close as well.

\_I have supplied you with what is necessary\_, the male voice replied, with the faintest shade of irritation this time. \_With what is necessary and, to be frank, far more than is necessary. I anticipate no special difficulty with the procedure.\_

The male voice paused slightly, and then went on. \_And my feelings about death are not relevant. This is purely an operational matter. You may be assured that the subject herself has no such fear. You have her actions as warrant for that.\_ Another brief pause. \_With Miss Vance's gun, no less.\_

\_We are uneasy still\_, the second voice said. \_But we have given our word. It will be done. It is only that the path ahead may be very dark for her.\_

\_We'll see about that\_, the male voice said, sharp and decided. \_I accept all responsibility, and I have the final word in this matter as far as our people are concerned.\_

The other voice said softly, \_It will be done.\_

Or was it \_Thy will be done\_? I don't remember.

Then it muttered something in a tongue I could not understand, and faded.

I remained, in the cool, silent darkness, dormant. Waiting.

End  
file.